This letter is an English translation of an original manuscript written by Clara Habermann, grandmother of Pieter Kohnstam, telling of her hiding in the Netherlands from 1942 till May 7, 1945, the Day of Liberation.

May 7, 1945

THE GREAT DAY OF THE EUROPEAN LIBERATION:

I will try to write down the experiences I had during this time which has been so difficult for all of us.

Now that we are finally free, I can hardly comprehend that we survived this terrible time. But God protected me, and for that my heart is filled with gratitude. Unfortunately, I can't just be happy yet because I worry greatly about all of my loved ones. I don't know if my beloved children arrived safely Buenos Aires, Argentina; and I don't know if my dear husband and our dear Fritz are healthy and well. I know nothing of any of them.

The time before my escape from Amsterdam was a hell for us Jews. My children were in flight already, and I had no news of them. During that time, I took sleeping powder every evening, and that was a good thing. There were razzias almost every day, raids targeted at Jews, both during waking hours and at night. After my children left, I lived alone in our apartment on Merwedeplein for a few weeks, and during air raids sat with other people in a basement. One evening, the Germans sealed off the square and took away the Jews from all the houses. It was a horrible scene. Around 11 p.m., a Gestapo goon came into my place; I was completely calm, resigned to my fate. But they had their quota of Jews that night and didn't need me. After he left, I managed to go to bed. A week later, I moved to Wielingenstrasse. In the meantime, Leo and Grete had been taken on the street and fled again but managed to escape and get to their hiding place. A lot of my possessions were stolen by the Werkmanns at Wielingenstrasse.

The razzias continued. Toward the end, I slept several nights with Aryan people. I brought clothes and bedding with me, but my hosts kept most of my belongings when I moved on. Many people took advantage of the plight of the Jews. I kept negotiating with Kerkhoff about clearing out our apartment. He promised me that he would take care of it and that I shouldn't worry about it. But he was an appalling coward, and one day I found the apartment empty. I berated myself for relying on K. I should have taken care of things myself, but so many Jews were caught in the same dilemma. No one knew the best way to get things done, and much of what we did do turned out to be wrong. It is terrible that I don't even have our photographs. I managed to brings most of the clothes I had to Gerda Leske. But if I will see any of them again, who knows?

Through Irma Wild, I got to know a gentleman who helped her escape and promised to help me, too. When I spoke with him, he agreed to pick me up on September 9, 1942. Before I went with him, I heard that three Jewish women had been murdered by the people who put hid them, and I was advised not to go. But I remained firm in my decision and it saved my life. The man picked me up in the evening at half past six in

the Wielingenstrass. Mr. Hertzmann who was hiding there, too, didn't want to go. At the Berlacher Bridge, I removed the horrible Star of David from my coat, and the trip into the unknown began. We arrived at half past eight at the destination. What its name of the place was, I didn't know. We walked around in the darkness for three-quarters of an hour – to me it seemed forever. Finally, we arrived at the house. The people there all looked trustworthy, but it was just a stopover. I stayed for a short time, and then another man took me to the next destination. We walked for another half hour. When we got to the house, the people had already gone to bed, but they got up and gave me a friendly welcome. But the man of the house also warned me, "If something happens, we will keep your things for ourselves." I was given a small, clean room and went to bed completely exhausted to get some sleep.

The people had seven children. The oldest four were not supposed to know about me, and I sat in my upstairs room alone for two months. I received enough to eat, although I wasn't accustomed to the food. The people were very good to me.

But during the month of October, it got freezing cold and there was no oven in my room. So on the first of November I had to move again. That day, a Mister Verduyn picke me up. He was a fine man. As we said good-buy, the people told me that I could come back to their home at any time. At Verduyn's place, I had a small, pleasant room upstairs. There were flowers on a table. The family had three children under the age of six. They and the radio in the house became my favorite company. Mr. Verduyn went almost daily to Amsterdam to help Jews. It was getting worse and worse there.

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… if I could help. Mr. Hertzmann, whose wife had been sent to a camp, and who wanted to escape, too. The evening of February 11, 1943, Mr. Verduyn brought a 73-year-old woman, Mrs. Cossman, and Mr. Hertzmann to the house. She and I occupied the bedroom of the Verduyns. Mr. Hertzmann got one of the children's rooms. Now I wasn't so alone anymore, and that made things much more tolerable. We played cards and talked. In the evenings, when we sat with the family in the living room, Mr. Verduyn often played his accordion. Everything was good. The old woman was very neat. It turned out, she was the mother of Mrs. Spanier, who owned a cleaning business in Amsterdam.

At some point, Mr. Verduyn was supposed to bring the children of Mrs. Cossmann to Ede – that was the name of the town where we were staying – and that's when he met his fate. Someone ratted him out and he was arrested in Amsterdam and brought to the concentration camp in Vught. The children of Mrs. Cossman were taken to Westerborg. It was a terrible thing for all of us, and I felt so sorry for Mr. Verduyn's family.

We worried that the house would now be searched and had to leave right away. The three of us hiding out went back to the people I first stayed with, and they took us in. Mrs. C and I slept in the same bed. Mr. H had a bed in the children's room on the ground floor. We stayed there for seven months until it became too dangerous.

One day in November, we had to leave quite suddenly. We went separately to the town of Wageningen and stayed in different places. The people where I ended up took only interim refuges until they found more permanent accommodations. They were wonderful and treated me like a close relative. There were three lovely children in the house – ages nineteen, seven and one. Mr. Huek was a journalist. We quickly became best of friends.

After two weeks, I got new accommodations in Reukum with the family Rosenboom. It was nice there, too. I had a bedroom and a lovely living room. Mrs. Rosenboom was German; she came from Bremen and was a very good cook. There was a radio in the house, and everything was pleasant. I got to know a female teacher and her fiancé, good people in the town, who came by to keep me company. Unfortunately, someone betrayed the fact that we had a radio, and we received warning from the local police that there would be a search of the house that evening.

The woman from the underground responsible for all those in hiding in the area was an attorney from the Hague, known as “Aunt Marie,” a wonderful, selfless person.

On the day the house search, I had to leave quickly. Aunt Marie came to get me. She carried my suitcase. The weather in February of 1943 was awful, and it was difficult going. I had to wait for an hour in a house where the people were very nice. Later that night, the journey continued to Hilsum. Another woman came and brought me to my next refuge.

It was a dreadful experience. The family I stayed with was dirty and unkempt. The people were happy to have the extra income the underground paid them to keep me. The kitchen where I had to spend the night on a make-shift bed of chairs stank of smoke. It was revolting, and I had to suffer there for 10 weeks, profoundly unhappy. I celebrated my sixtieth birthday there. When Aunt Marie finally found another place for me, I was glad to get away.

I was able to leave these pigs in April 1944. I arrived in Reukum and had very clean lodgings and good meals. The couple I stayed with didn’t have any children. The woman worked as a maid for a baker. Unfortunately, she later revealed herself to be a great scoundrel and made life difficult for me.

On September 17, he first day of Rosh Hashana, came the allied invasion. I cried in happiness. I could see the paratroopers land in the distance. It was a gorgeous sight.

Unfortunately, things didn’t go as expected. The Germans came and surrounded our house. We found ourselves in midst of the battle. Wounded and prisoners passed by on the road, and I spent the night in the cellar.

On October 1, we had to flee under heavy bombing. I joined the refuge caravan of people and animals, including sick and old people. The roads were poor. After walking for three hours, we finally ended up with a farmer in Benekom. Altogether, we were seventeen people who ended up living there, sleeping on straw in a hen house. After

several days, I didn't think I couldn't tolerate it much longer. By then, I was going outside on the street regularly, and I looked for other sleeping accommodations. I found it in the form of a built-in bedstead in a small house, where a woman had died a few days earlier. She had just been buried. I didn't care. I took the people from Reukum with me, and we slept in the bed chamber. The farmer who owned the place had four adult children – two daughters and two sons. They were all wonderful people, so kind and good and always friendly. But the woman from Reukom at whose house I had stayed continued to be unpleasant and mean.

On October 23, we had to be evacuated. The farmer brought us to his brother and his family in Lunteren, the Foleners. There were more refugees there, and we all slept together again, all seventeen of us. We were well taken care of, although the place stank to heaven. But I was with good people and had good food.

On December 15, we were able to return to Benekom, but on January 23, we had to flee once more. We stayed again with the family to Lunteren, where finally, on April 17, the great liberation happened. We were all crazy with happiness and greeted our liberators boisterously. I kept worrying about the fate of all my loved ones, close to my heart, which prevented me from taking delight in our freedom.

Soon, in Lunteren, the place where we stayed was turned into a field hospital. The staff were nice people, and the little English I had learned in school came in handy. Several soldiers wrote letters on my behalf to you, my darlings, but I haven't heard anything from you as yet, and that is a sore spot. One evening, I played Bridge with two English officers, who were excellent hosts. It was a nice change to spend time with well-educated people.

On May 12, we returned with our dear Mr. Folener to Benekom. I had enough to eat, and suffered no hardship. I now waited eagerly to go back to Amsterdam in the hope to finally hear something from my loved ones.

A month later, on June 12, I was able to return to Amsterdam. Saying our good-byes from the Folener family was very moving. At half past six in the morning, everyone on the farm came to the car taking me, and we all cried. These people will always remain my friends. I was on good terms with everyone in the village and had to promise them all that I would come back sometime for a visit.